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ABSTRACT

Up to the present, no studies have been done in the area of child language in Mexico. The Center of Linguistic and Literary Studies of the Colegio de Mexico carried out an empirical investigation of the language of six- to seven-year-old Mexican children. This paper presents, in preliminary form, some partial results of the investigation, focussing upon one experiment based on the ideas of Jean Piaget. The working hypothesis was that an egocentric six-year-old, in telling a story to other children, would not be concerned about expressing himself clearly, resulting in the omission of information necessary for the understanding of the story. It was further hypothesized that differences could be observed in the way the children told a story, depending on their socioeconomic background. Fifty-nine children were instructed to narrate a story to two classmates. The narrations were tape-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to obtain an index of omission of information in the story. A comparison was then made among the children on the basis of the three socioeconomic groups they represented. Preliminary conclusions include: (1) factors such as age or intelligence did not systematically affect the information omission scores; and (2) the socioeconomic background factor did seem to affect the scores, with children of poorer background omitting the greatest number of information units. Further analysis of the data is still underway. (AM)

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Egocentrism in the language of six to seven-year-old Mexican children

Oralia Rodríguez

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Egocentrism in the language of six to seven-year-old Mexican children

Introduction.

The experiment of which I shall be describing some preliminary results is part of a research project on child language in Mexico City in which the relationship between the social position of parents, the socialization of children in the family and children's speech is studied.

For this project, three groups of six to seven-year-old children were chosen with respect to their fathers' occupation: government and clerical employees, workers and a marginal group[1]. Care was taken to exclude children with an intelligence quotient of less than 80 or pronunciation defects such as rhotacism, stuttering etc. In this way twenty children of employees, nineteen workers' children and twenty marginals were selected as subjects of the investigation. With each child nine experiments were carried out, each one having been designed to produce a speech sample related to a particular social situation.

This paper outlines one of these experiments and some of the preliminary results which we have obtained up to the present, in relation to a specific problem: egocentrism in child language.

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1) For these occupational groups the following selectional criteria were established: the employee group was considered to include persons with a contract of employment whose work was non-manual in nature, the worker group, persons occupied in manual work in a fixed location in which, moreover, at least fifteen other workers were employed, and the marginal group, persons occupied in manual tasks of a temporary nature, without contract or social benefits.

The problem.

In view of our conviction that a study of child language should take into account the characteristics of the subject who produces this language, we took as our point of departure Jean Piaget's research on the nature of children's thought.

Piaget considers that children's thought is egocentric and he uses the term "egocentric" not in the ordinary sense of "excessive consciousness of, and attention to, oneself", but rather to denote an incapacity for decentration, that is, for modifying a given cognitive perspective. Egocentrism in thought is unconscious and originates in the failure to differenciate between one's own, and other possible points of view.

Piaget describes egocentrism as occupying genetically, structurally and functionally an intermediate position between autistic and directed thought. "Directed thought is conscious, i.e., it pursues an aim which is present to the mind of the thinker; it is intelligent, which means that it is adapted to reality and tries to influence it; it admits of being true or false (empirically or logically true), and it can be communicated by language. Autistic thought is subconscious, which means that the aims it pursues and the problems it tries to solve are not present in consciousness; it is not adapted to reality, but creates for itself a dream world of imagination; it tends, not to establish truths, but so to satisfy desires, and it remains strictly individual and incommunicable as such by means of language".[1)]

Between these two contrasting forms of thought there are many intermediate types with varying degrees of communicability. "These intermediate varieties must therefore

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1) The Language and Thought of the Child, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1959 (third edition), p. 43.

be subject to a special logic, intermediate too between the logic of autism and that of intelligence. The chief of those intermediate forms, i.e. the type of thought which like that exhibited by our children seeks to adapt itself to reality, but does not communicate itself as such, we propose to call Ego-centric thought".[1)]

This mental attitude is reflected in language in the following form: in egocentric speech, the child talks to himself as in a monologue, he does not take his listener into account, nor does he try to communicate or expect replies and, frequently, he is not even interested whether others pay attention to him or not. On the otherhand, in socialized language the child attempts exchanges with others, he pleads, gives orders, threatens, transmits information and asks questions.

Piaget's experiments show that most of the pre-school child's conversation is egocentric: for seven-year-olds, he found that 44 to 47% of the total of recorded conversations were egocentric in nature. He considers that this index is considerably higher in younger children and diminishes with age[2)]. Later research with six and seven-year-olds proves that, at this age, socialized language is still not entirely devoid of egocentric characteristics.

Furthermore, Piaget has indicated that there can be some delay in some children's individual development, and also acceleration in the case of gifted individuals or geniuses. There is, likewise, collective delay or acceleration in certain social groups or environments, due very probably to the effects of collective life. In comparative research carried out in various countries, the findings show a correspondence with, or

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1) Ibid., p. 45.

2) Judgement and Reasoning in the Child, Littlefield, Adams and Co., New Jersey, 1972, p. 206.

retardation in relation to, the average ages cited by Piaget for Genevan children's accomplishment of certain specific tasks, related to the acquisition of the notions of conservation, seriation, classification etc.[1].

An adult social environment where there is no intellectual stimulation, says Piaget, can be the cause of delay in children's development. Education in the widest sense constitutes a determining factor in this development, though not, in itself, a sufficient cause.

For the purposes of our study, we adapt Piaget's ideas in the following terms:

1) We supposed that an egocentric six-year-old child, in a situation in which he had to communicate verbally a story to other children, would not be concerned about expressing himself clearly so that his listeners might understand him. The consequent lack of clarity would consist in the omission of information necesary for the understanding of the story.

2) In accordance with the previously mentioned comparative studies in various countries, we considered that it would be possible to observe differences between each of the social groups studied, concerning the way the children told a story.

Our working hypothesis was formulated as follows: that the children, because of their characteristic egocentrism, would omit information in a story, but that they would do so in

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1) For example, Canadian psychologists found that in Montreal children accomplish these tasks at more or less the same ages as the Geneva children, but in Martinique a delay of four years was discovered. In Iran the delay was two and a half years amongst illiterate peassants, while in the city of Teheran the average ages coincided with those of Geneva. Cf. Problemas de psicología genética, Ariel, Barcelona, 1975, pp. 33 - 34. (French original published by Eds. Denoël-Gonthier, Paris, 1972).

different degrees: the children of the marginal group would omit a greater amount of information than the children in the other groups. Our objective, then, was to measure the degree of information omission.

The Method.

The story-telling experiment we designed is similar to that of Piaget[1], and consisted in an interviewer narrating a story with a set of graphic illustrations to the children selected for the experiments, taking them in groups of three at a time. Then each child was asked to narrate the story to two of his classmates, using the set of illustrations[2]. The children's stories were tape-recorded, transcribed literally and analyzed for the proportion of information omitted. This proportion was measured by an index calculated in the following manner: we divided the story into twenty-six items which we called "units of information"[3] and which we considered essential for the understanding of the story's plot. Then we counted the number of units reproduced by the child and divided it by the total. The result was subtracted from the maximum possible, that is 1.0, and the fraction thus obtained is what

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1) The Language and Thought of the Child, p. 79ff.

2) Obviously, the illustrations play some role in the narration since they transmit information. However, what is taken into account for the purposes of this study, is the verbal transmission of this information. It would be interesting, though, to study systematically the references to the illustrations and, thereby, to analyze the function of deictics in the narrations.

3) The "units of information" were established as follows: 1) Once upon a time there was a little fly (or bee or ant or any other animal which could be the protagonist). 2) The little fly was bored (or sad or tired or in any frame of mind which could motivate his desire to go out). 3) He decides to go for a "walk" (go round the block, take a trip or some other equivalent). 4) He gets hungry.

we refer to as "index of information omitted".

To illustrate the way in which this index applies, I will give three examples of the stories obtained. (The bracketed dots indicate our suppression of incoherent verbalization, incomplete words etc. The diagonal bars indicate short pauses and the double bars long ones).

Our first example comes from a little girl of the age of six years, four months. She omitted sixteen units of information and thus acored an index of 0.62, the highest in our sample:

FPR: "There was a... a little moth/ and then um... he got home/ and he got home and there was some soup and he ate it and it tasted bad/ and the little moth said to the little chicken where/ where/ is there some food and he said to him that there were in a shop er... some cakes/ and then here they hit him/ and he said why is he eating the cakes/ here he trod on him and here he's real fat/"[1].

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5) He looks through a window (or into a house). 6) A bowl of soup (or something to eat). 7) He tastes the soup. 8) He doesn't like it because its cold (or for some other reason). He continues his search for food. Etc. etc. The complete story is reproduced in the third transcription included in the text.

1) Translator's note: Since we can hardly hope to convey all the colloquial and stylistic features of these narrations in our translation, we will, in each case, give the corresponding original text in Spanish in a footnote. In this case, the text runs as follows:

"que estuvo un... una palomita/ y entonces m... llegó a su casa/ y ya llegó y ya 'staba una sopa y se la comió y le supo feo/ y la palomita le dijo al pollito que dónde/ que dónde/ hay comida y le dijo que había en una tienda este... pasteles/ y luego aquí le pegaron/ y dijo que pa' qué se come los pasteles/ aquí ya le pisó y aquí ya 'stá bien gorda/".

The account is confusing and vague: suddenly a "little chicken" appears from nowhere; it is not clear who hits whom, nor who mentions the cakes nor who treads on whom, etc. Clearly, the listeners heard a story which was so incomplete as to be incomprehensible.

Let us turn now to a narration which contains more information. The subject is a six year ten month-old boy. He omitted six units of information, which produces an index of 0.24, an intermediate acore in our sample:

JMCL: "First a little fly never used to go out (of the house)/ and he said I'm going to go for a walk/ and so he goes out/ (...) and he went to find (...) in a window and er.../ (...) he saw a bowl of soup/ (...) and he eats it and said ugh! it tastes horrible! it was cold/ so he said to a little duck/ little duck can you tell me where there is a cake-shop?/ (...) and the duck said/ there at the corner in a cake-shop/ and then er he went and ate er a thingumajig and said yum yum! er.../ cakes/ and then the cake-man... no the what's his name?/ the baker saw a fly and said ugh! there's a fly amongst my cakes ugh!/ so he/ killed him and... left him quite flattened out/ and so er (...) he was flying around and he.../ no er he got stuck there/ so he er ate up all the piece of gum so they wouldn't tread on him/ and he got very fat/ so he said I'm going to go to school/ because I'm going to get my school-things ready/ and the red grasshopper said that's all//"[1].

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1) The original text runs as follows:

"primero una mosquita no salía de la casa/ y dijo voy a dar un paseo/ y ento's que sale/ (...) y que fue a encontrar (...) en una ventana y este.../ (...) vio un plato de sopa/ (...) que se lo toma y dijo ¡uy sabe muy feo! estaba fría/

This story is more complete though still rather confused: the subject tells us that the fly is flying around and gets stuck (he does not say where), but it seems that he has forgotten that immediately before this he has told us that the baker "killed him and left him quite flattened out". How can the fly then still be flying around? Our subject apparently is not bothered by this.

Lastly, we give the narration which scored the lowest index. The subject was a girl aged 7 years 0 months, and was the only one to reproduce all 26 units of information, for which she obtained a score of 0.0.

GSAR: "Once upon a time there was a little fly/ who lived in this house/ and he was very bored because he never went out and one day he said: oh! I'm so bored! I'm going to go out/ after that he went out and saw the flowers, the countryside the trees/ after that he was very hungry/ and he looked into a house/ and there was a bowl of soup/ (...) after that he

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ento's le dijo a un patito/ patito no me puedes icir donde hay una pastelería?/ (...) y dijo el pato/ allá en la esquina en una pastelería/ y que luego este jue a comer este un d'ése y dijo ¡qué rica! este.../ pasteles/ y luego que el pastelerí... no el ¿cómo se llama?/ el pastelero vio una mosca y dijo fuchi anda una mosca en mis pasteles ¡fuchi!/ ento's que la/ mató y... la dejó muy aplastada/ y ento's este (...) andaba volando y se.../ no este se quedó ahí pegada/ ento's este se comió todo el chicle para que no lo pisaran/ y se hizo muy gorda/ ento's dijo voy a ir a la escuela/ porque voy a preparar mis útiles/ y dijo el chapulín colorado ya se terminó//".

The bizarre final line in the English version is due to a confusion, on the part of the subject, between a formula to end narrations in Spanish "colorín colorado, este cuento se ha acabado" and a popular children's television program in Mexico, "El chapulin colorado", whence the reference to the grasshopper.

went inside the house and tried the soup and said ugh! this soup's cold!/ I'll look for another and I'll look for some food/ after that (...) he looked down below and saw a little duck and said little duck do you know where I can find some food?/ and he said there on the corner there's a cake-shop and there are some delicious cakes which you'll really like/ after that he said what yummy cakes!/ after that he started eating them and the baker came/ after that he was really mad he said ugh! this fly is eating my cakes/ and he hit him/ (...) after that he fell and got stuck on a piece of gum/ (...) and the little fly said oh dear! there's a man coming and he's going to tread on me I've got to think of something to get away from here so the man won't tread on me/ after that he ate up the whole piece of gum and said/ oh dear! now I'm very fat now what am I going to do?/ after that he was getting thinner and thinner and thinner and after that he said/ oh! I was forgetting I have to go to school tomorrow/ I'll go home right now and get my books and notebooks ready/ and he lived happily ever after"[1].

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1) Original in Spanish:

"había una vez una mosquita/ que vivía en esta casita/ y estaba bien aburrida porque no salía y un día dijo ¡ay estoy bien aburrida! voy a salir/ después salió veía las flores el campo los árboles/ después tenía mucha hambre/ y vio en una casa/ y había un plato de sopa/ (...) después entró a la casa y probó la sopa y dijo ¡ay esta sopa está fría!/ buscaré otro y buscaré comida/ después (...) miró para abajo y vio un patito y le dijo patito ¿sabes dónde puedo encontrar comida?/ y dijo allá en la esquina hay una pastelería y hay unos pasteles bien ricos que te gustarán mucho/ después dijo ¡ay que rico pasteles!/ después

The results.

On tabulating our results in a distribution graph, we observe that the degree of information omission shown by the children varies between a minimum of 0.0 and a maximum of 0.62 (the maximum possible being 1.0) with a mean value of 0.21, and that the distribution follows a normal curve (see graph on following page).

Our immediate question is: what causes the index differences? Piaget says that child egocentrism decreases with age but, given that the respective ages of our subjects differ only in terms of months, not years, we do not have a sufficiently broad age-scale to test this statement. Nevertheless, we explored the possibility that a difference of eleven or twelve months, for example, might show some correlation to the differences in the index of information omission, and we found that the age factor, in the age differences in our sample, does not explain our results.

Another factor which might be taken as a possible explanation of these differences is the intelligence quotient. It might be hypothesized, for example, that a high IQ would accompany a low index of information omission. According to the Goodenough scale our subjects have an average IQ of 95. However, when we looked for a correlation between these two

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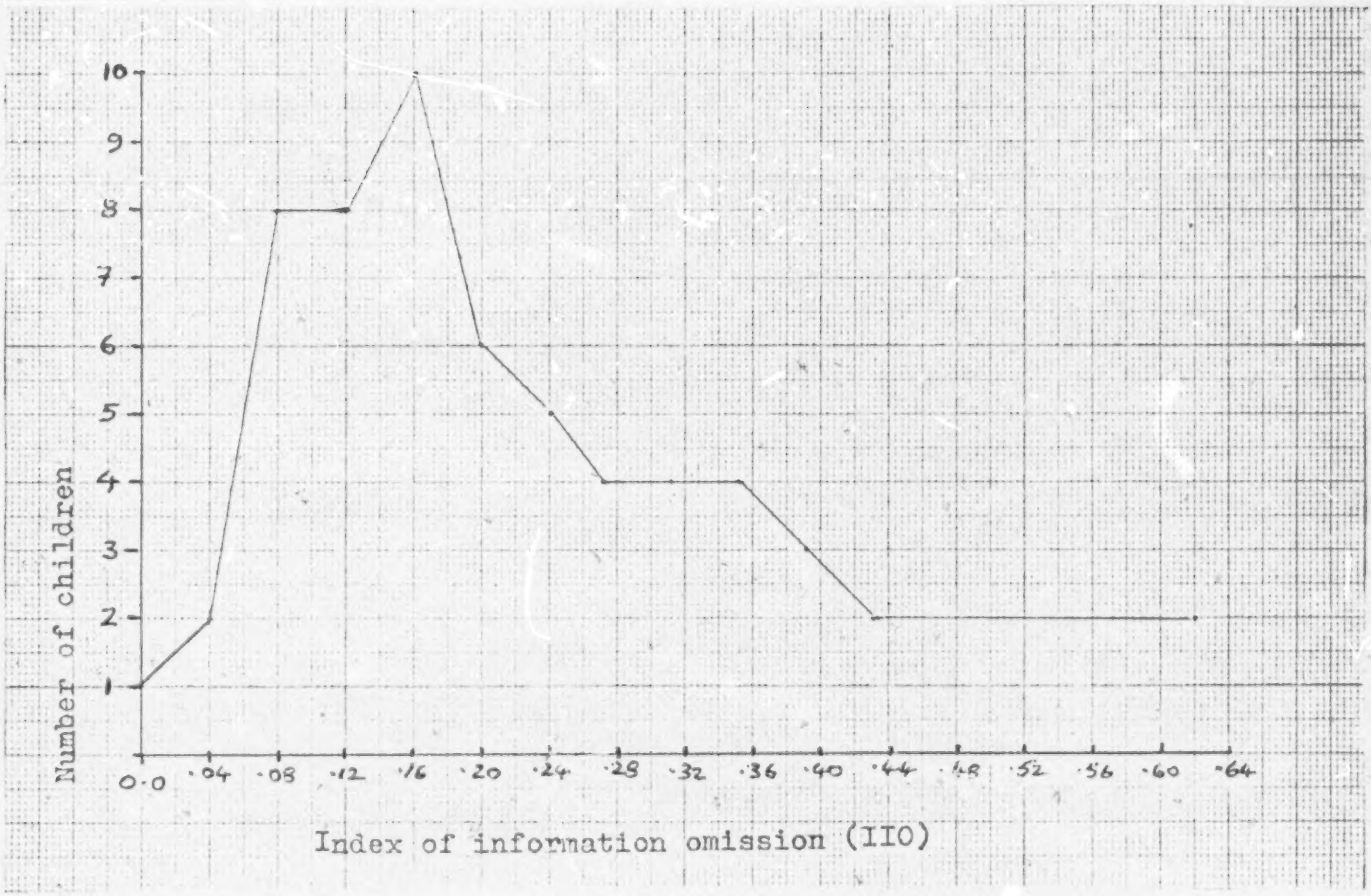
se los empezó a comer y llegó el pastelero/ después estaba muy enojado dijo ¡ay! esta mosca se está comiendo mis pateles/ y le pegó (...) después se cayó y se pegó en un chicle/ (...) y dijo la mosquita ¡ay! ahi viene un señor y me va a pisar tengo que pensar una cosa para quitarme de aquí y que no me pise el señor/ después se comió todo todo el chicle y dijo/ ¡ay! ahora estoy muy gorda ahora ¿qué voy a hacer?/ después se estaba haciendo flaca flaca flaca y después dijo/ ¡ay! ya se me estaba olvidando que mañana tengo que ir a la escuela/ ya me voy a mi casita a preparar mis cuadernos y mis libros/ y colorín colorado este cuento se ha acabado".

Translator's note: Though this last line is not a literal translation of the Spanish text, it is the nearest formulaic equivalent we could find.



factors in each individual case, we found none[1].

Finally, we tried to ascertain whether the social group to which the children belong had some bearing on the index differences. In our second distribution graph we see that the indices of the employee and worker groups tend to be concentrated at the lower score levels, with an average index

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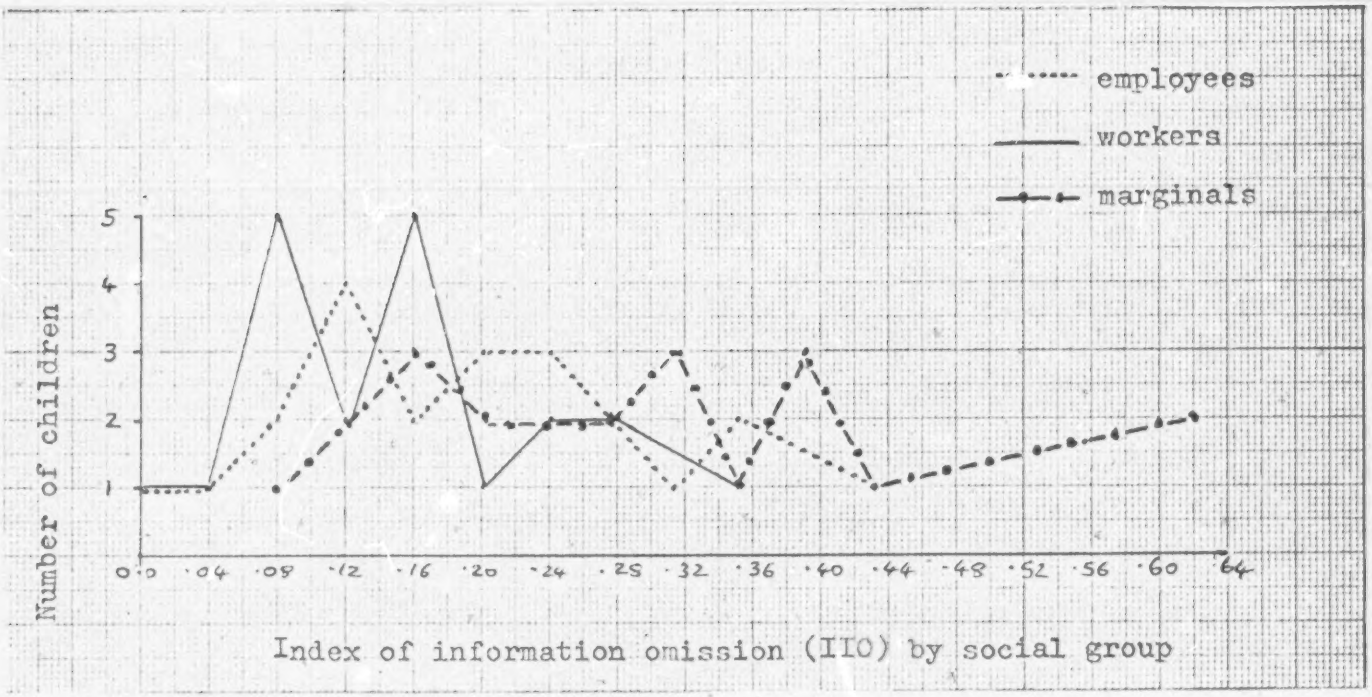
1) With a more refined measurement scale such as WISC, which we also applied, perhaps some relation will be found between information omission and the factor of memory. However, we do not yet have available the results of this test so that, for the moment, we are unable to test this hypothesis.



score of 0.18 for employees and 0.16 for workers; on the other hand, the marginal group tended towards higher scores, with an average score of 0.29.

In other words, the most notable difference is between the marginal group and the other two. Summarizing for each social group the three factors previously mentioned, we have the following chart:

Averages

	Employees	Workers	Marginals	Total
Age	6.7	6.8	6.7	6.7
IQ	97	93	96	95
IIO	0.18	0.16	0.29	0.21

From this chart we way deduce the following: the age averages in each case are almost identical and do not explain the index differences. The IQ averages, although they show sone variation, do not relate to the IIO differences. We way therefore conclude that these individual factors do not affect the relation of IIO to social group, and that the IIO differences are probably due to factors of social origin.

The next steps we will take in our investigation will be to analyze in detail the "information units" to see which were reproduced systematically, which were most frequently omitted etc. We hope also for interesting results from an analysis of the syntax used by the children, as well as from a comparison of the other experiments in the Project, in order to see whether they show similar or different tendencies.

Conclusions.

For the moment, we may present the following preliminary conclusions:

1) In a situation of eminently social communication, in which the subject narrates a story to two listeners, the children in our study showed an information omission index of 0.21.

2) Individual factors such as age or intelligence quotient did not systematically affect the information omission scores obtained by each child.

3) It seems that the social background of the children does have a bearing on the index omission scores they obtained.

Which, though, of the characteristics of social group, are those which specifically affect the children's language? the type of work their parents are engaged in?: the parents' education? or the financial situation in the family as it relates to the possibility of providing adequate nourishment

for the child and suitable stimuli for his development? or should such factors be taken together? Since our investigation is still in progress, as soon as the sociological and psychological data have been processed, we will undoubtedly be in a better position to evaluate such questions.

Oralia Rodríguez,
El Colegio de México,
Mex. D.F., 11 de nov., 1976.